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THE
ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY
Town Hall, Bombay.

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on 30 January, 2020

ALEXANDRIA.

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BY

FRA'MJI' R. VIKA'JI'.

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1867.

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TO

SIR ALEXANDER GRANT, BART. LL.D.

IN MEMORY OF THOSE CHERISHED HOURS,
—HOURS WHICH NO FUTURE CAN ECLIPSE,—
WHEN IN THE DAWN OF YOUTHFUL POWERS,
WE LOVED TO GATHER FROM YOUR LIPS
THOSE "REASONED TRUTHS" AND LAWS REFINED,
TO DRILL AND DISCIPLINE THE MIND:
THOSE LOFTIEST SPECIMENS OF THOUGHT,
OR NEWLY MINTED, MEANING-FRAUGHT,
OR FROM THE CLASSIC SOURCES DRAWN,
WITH ALL THEIR LIFE AND FRESHNESS ON;
ILLUSTRIOUS SIR, WHOSE WEDDED NAME
IS LINKED WITH ARISTOTLE'S FAME,
THESE EFFORTS, DONE WITH FEEBLE ART,
I NOW ADDRESS; AND HOPE TO BE
TRUE TO YOUR DOCTRINE AND DECREE,
AND KEEP YOUR LESSONS IN MY HEART.

January 1897.

ALEXANDRIA.

ANALYSIS.

1. ALEXANDRIA, its geographical site.
2. The modern town.
3. Antiquities in the neighbourhood.
4. Pompey's Pillar. Cleopatra's Needles.
5. Foundation of the ancient city by Alexander.
6. The disappearance of the Heptastadium, of the market-place near Neptune's Temple, and of the two largest streets of Alexandria.
7. The Necropolis. The Cisterns.
8. The Brucheion. The Museion.
9. The Library. Death of Diodorus the SLOW.
10. The disturbances at Alexandria.
11. The associations of Alexandria are intellectual. Hypatia, the female Plato.
12. The Serapium. The second Library. Its carping grammarians. The Arabian conquest.
13. John Philoponus. His request to Amrú. Allusion to the dilemma of Omar. Burning of the books.
14. Our real loss in history and poetry. Allusion to Bacon's simile of Time and the Wind.
15. The fate of Alexandria. A prophecy.
16. A moonlight sail on the Mahmúdieh Canal.

ALEXANDRIA.

I STAND in Alexandria. At my feet
Slumbers the classic dust of Pharaoh's days.
Eastward, unseen, three continents do meet;
Southward, three pyramids their towers raise;
Northward within my view I seem to gaze
Over three battle-grounds; while o'er the sea
Flags of three nations meet in motley maze.
Port of three worlds, of triple trade the key,
E'en history's self conspires to yield her palm to thee!

2

The dismal ramparts flanked with jealous gates,
The dingy streets, the mosques each crescent-crowned,
The clustering spires, the slender minarets,
The pillared palace mouldering on the mound,
The saddled donkeys, camels baggage-bound,
The Pharian towers that guard the seas afar,
The turbaned men, and women sheeted round,
The marble bath and picturesque bazaar,
Adorn the modern town, or its old beauties mar.

3

A Mahmúd sways where swayed the Ptolemies;
An Arab teaches where the Greek once taught.
Old scenes are fled, no more new aspects please:
Whilome they slept embalmed in lovely thought;
Now the old piles have an asylum sought,
To yon suburban ruins to rehearse
The mournful legend of their crumbling lot.
Oh for some talismanic power of verse
From fate of monuments to spare these sepulchres!

4

There is a grandeur in decay of towns,
A loveliness in ruins. Let me climb
This column's height which 'mid the desert frowns
O'er granite pigmies like a god sublime.
Here let me ponder on the bones of time,
The fossils of an ancient world, where streams
The light of history through its hazy prime.
The hieroglyph upon each Needle teems
With the grand meaning of half-interpreted dreams.

5

O'er the enchanted waste the city spreads,
And I could map again its ancient plan.
In rosy dreams rapt Alexander treads
Homeric Pharos. Lo, beneath his span
There is another Athens born to man!
Upon the lake the Greek gymnasium stands,
Where fought the matches and the races ran:
Five shafts,—sole vestige now,—there dot the sands,
While here palatial fronts are saved by magic hands.

6

Where is the Heptastadium, that did span
The sea between the city and the isle?
Say, where is Neptune's temple (find who can),
That heard the market-stir at morning's smile,
With lilies and papyrus from the Nile?
Where those two famous streets that, stretching wide,
Traversed the town across from mile to mile,
And north and south the homeward sails espied,
Making for either harbour on the glittering tide?

7

Except the gloomy City of the Dead,
And marble cisterns, all is death-like still.
The mummies still sleep in their ancient bed,
But the old cisterns, scooped by tyrant-will,
Still from the Nile their watery chambers fill.
Let grateful thoughts visit each ancient cell,
And wonder at these works of useful skill.
But without bard or scholar who can tell
Of famed Brucheion, where old Ptolemies did dwell!

8

Brucheion! 'Tis a grand suggestive name,
A spell prolific, at whose bidding springs
A glorious catalogue of deathless fame,
A galaxy of sages, bards, and kings,
The stars of the Museion. Say, can things
To science sacred share an earthly doom?
Death will not slay the muses with its stings;
Their bowers will not languish into gloom,
But green within the mind grow in perennial bloom.

9

The manuscripts of Greece, the ponderous tomes,
A pyramid of books, they fill the place.
New arts, new science, seek these favoured homes.
I hear the teachers of the human race,
I see their hall where kings and sages grace
A common board, where feats of wit go round.
See Stilpo riddling to a thoughtful face;
He thinks: he's SLOW; he hears the fatal sound,
And, ah! a Keats-like spirit bleeds beneath the wound.

10

Hotbed of schisms, land of traitor-hearts!
In thee are germs of feud and discord laid,
And civil-fury cradled in thy marts.
With fierce fanatic zeal they launch their hate
On friend and foe, still rushing on their fate.
Hence this is not the last sad, evil day
That shakes the city from its palmy state.
The bearded Moslem yet will lead the fray,
And with an iron arm assert his tyrant-sway.

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11

Let me associate with old times that shed
Perennial halo round the muses' seats.
And on my memory crowd the deathless dead,
Fathers of physics, ministers of creeds,
Those who in fields of science sowed the seeds.
Nor let the sweet Hypatia be forgot,
The fair philosopher, whose memory needs
No mightier monument upon the spot
Than this time-honoured pillar where she lived and taught.

12

Yes. Near this column where I stand beguiled
Rose the Serapium with its marble face,
And galleries of books "enormous piled."
Here did she preach her Plato. Here a race
Of sophists breathed their knowledge from the place.
And here, till rude unlettered Arabs come,
Expiring science lingers for a space.
They come! victorious from their desert-home,
They come! offering the Koran, tribute or the doom.

13

Nor let the last of scholars ask a boon
From fiery natures fostered in the field.
The souls of kaliphs cannot con too soon
The beauty of old books still unrevealed.
The famed dilemma here is writ and sealed.
And Amrú willing speeds the royal will.
O for some ancient Medici to shield
These peerless pages from impending ill,—
Fuel for million baths that all the city fill.

14

No song, no urn, no elegies rehearse
The sack of science, that forced back mankind.
Where is the epic, where the lyric verse,
Histories and relics of the storied mind?
Perhaps the grain is lost, the chaff is blown
To latter men on Time's autumnal wind.
Dash down, my heart, these sorrows scarce thine own,
The harvest springs again when seeds are fresher sown.

15

See now the fated city grovelling lies,
The nerveless nation bites the despot's chain !
While foreign rulers wrangle for the prize,
Life slowly darkens o'er the tented plain.
But hark ! new music, in millennial strain,
Sings the far flush of renovated morn.
Trade's peopled navies ride the azure main ;
And golden glimpses of the past return,
When Alexandria shall once more the earth
adorn.

16

Farewell ! the fairy hopes of busy tongues.—
I love to sail on the canal's soft breast
When Sidhi sailors chant their sable songs,
The moon peeps lovely from her cloudy nest,
The starry shadows in the waters rest.
Then beautiful along the stream I glide
Beneath the lovely palm's majestic crest,
Till silver moonlight fails the boat's dark side,
And orient splendours wake upon the matin tide.

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